

# Woodshedding in the middle school classroom

by

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## **Abstract**

Students in a combined choir of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders learned the basics of woodshedding, which is a technique that barbershop choirs use to add harmony to a melody without the use of written music. Building off of previous skills, particularly ear training through use of solfege and Curwen hand signs, students learned how to create their own vocal harmony with any given chord progression. Students demonstrated these skills by singing along with the melody, “You Are My Sunshine.”

Through my courses at Kansas State University, two main areas of development have been, 1) continued growth in teaching beginners using Gordon’s Music Learning Theory (Gordon, 2012) and Curwen handsigns for ear training, 2) developing a culture of excellence that expands to all vocal students, teaching them strong character, work ethic, and musicianship for a lifetime of making music.

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# **Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy**

## **Why do we have formal education?**

Humans have always known that it was important for knowledge to be passed on from the elders to their young. As cultures developed, they passed on knowledge of language, history, farming techniques, tools, etc., in order for each generation to improve upon the previous and have a better life.

This continued for millennia until the Age of Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, it was thought that the human mind was the answer to everything. The ability to reason was thought to be the solution to eradicate all social conflicts (Clifford-Vaughan, 1963, p. 135). That rationale has not changed today. From my observations, it is believed that education is the answer to escaping poverty, overcoming social issues, and improving life in general. This is the deepest foundational assumption that drives our educational model in the United States today.

As people groups unified and set up governments, it became the government's responsibility to provide education for its people. As a result, priorities for education are now legislated. The United States has had different priorities at different points in its history. During the cold war and space race, science and mathematics were the highest priority so that young students would grow up to contribute to the United States' world leading technology and aerospace infrastructure (Hunt, 2018). With the recent push for all of humanity to be equal, I believe that the largest driving force in America's education is standardization so that all students are taught in the same way.

## **Why do we have music education?**

Music has always been one of the highest forms of human expression. Music is a way to communicate to the gods, to remember heroes, and to educate youth. A flourishing culture has the arts at its pinnacle, but a floundering family can also bond through music. Arts are a shared human experience across time, borders, and cultures. It has been recognized that the arts, and specifically music, is needed for a complete, rounded education (Pietsch & Barsdate, 2017, p. 9).

Over time, however, music has become less participatory. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the public could purchase sheet music cheaply because of the newly invented printing press. They would perform it as a family, or arrange larger groups to experience the music. But with the invention of professional recordings on records, cassettes, CDs, etc., people no longer buy sheet music, but they buy performances of the music. Now, it is up to a select few to create musical experiences for others to only listen to, not create. We can listen to a quality performance in the privacy of our own home or while driving a car.

The consumption of music has changed drastically from the invention of phonograph in 1877 to the digital streaming services like Spotify and Pandora of today. It is a common sight to see students walking down the street and between class with headphones on and blaring music loudly from their car stereos. This is a very different way of experiencing music from how we teach them in music class. “Popular forms of music play a central role in the lifestyle of most teenagers... Furthermore, positive attitudes to pop music may also be accompanied by lack of interest in ‘traditional’ forms of music such as ‘classical’ music” (Lamont, Hargeaves, Marshall, & Tarrant, 2003, p. 230). Because music education has been slow to adapt to a changing culture, I believe that many young people don’t feel the need to participate in a school music program.

When a society experiences economic stress, their government will cut what it sees as irrelevant. Because of the government's priorities and the public's perception of music education, music and the arts are some of the first programs to be cut in the western world.

This has led to the genesis of music advocacy groups, which have funded research into why we need to keep music as a part of education. There have been countless studies into the benefits of learning music published over the past years. For example, neuroscientists have found that,

“The arts can help students pay better attention in school due to structural brain changes created when the students were engaged in practicing their art form... they are also developing a high level of concentration that will aid them when they are working on the next algebra problem.” (Cole, 2011, p. 26)

### **How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching**

From this research, and my own experiences, I believe that music education is a vital part to a school's overall health. Communities need to have ways to interact and participate with their schools, and those that have a strong tradition in music are set above others that do not. In our culture, the driving force behind community involvement in the schools is sports. There may be other activities, but the sheer number of sporting events is so high, it seems there is nothing else. If a school has a healthy music program, it provides a different type of activity for students and the community to participate in and reaches a different demographic of participants and spectators. However, I have realized that if music education is to survive and continue to be relevant, it needs to adapt to a rapidly changing culture among our youth.



With the progress of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, particularly the genre of “popular” music, some students have less interest in music that they feel is outdated or that they characterize as “choir music.” Despite the individualized and private lives we live, everyone still desires to create bonds with others. If a piece of music doesn’t connect with a student, or if they cannot connect with others through that music, the music itself has no value. A choir’s population can dwindle if the director doesn’t help students make these connections.

Students need to have experiences where they are able to create their own music. If a student creates the music instead of a teacher, that connection is much stronger and they will find more value in continuing to perform music. This is why I developed the lesson outlined below. Woodshedding is a way for students to have a shared experience creating music. A traditional choral classroom has the teacher at the center, interpreting the music, and giving direction to the ensemble on how to achieve the composer’s vision. While this still needs to happen, and has value in it, students need to have other outlets for their creativity in order to flourish. Woodshedding will also allow them to sing modern songs to connect with those who are not in choir.

## Chapter 2 - Lesson Plans

### Day 1

[Video Link](#) – Lesson one

Objective – Students will review chord structure of I, IV, V, and vi chords using solfege. Students will develop the skill of singing these chords in any order.

1. Review Chords using “do re repeat.”

Do Mi So

Fa La Do

So Ti Re

La Do Mi

2. Sing each as piano is being played, then sing a cappella as director gives starting syllable.

### Day 2

[Video Link](#) – Lesson two

Objective – Students will recognize step-wise motion within a chord progression to create a harmony.

1. Sing Chords a cappella as director gives starting syllable.

2. Write chords on the board in I – vi – V – IV – I order.

Ask students to observe how a note can move up, down, or stay the same depending on the chord progression.

|    |           |           |           |           |           |    |           |           |           |           |           |
|----|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|    | <b>So</b> | Mi        | Re        | Do        | So        |    | So        | <b>Mi</b> | <b>Re</b> | <b>Do</b> | So        |
|    | Mi        | Do        | Ti        | La        | <b>Mi</b> |    | <b>Mi</b> | Do        | Ti        | La        | Mi        |
|    | Do        | <b>La</b> | <b>So</b> | <b>Fa</b> | Do        |    | Do        | La        | So        | Fa        | <b>Do</b> |
| or |           |           |           |           |           | or |           |           |           |           |           |
|    | So        | Mi        | Re        | Do        | <b>So</b> |    | <b>So</b> | Mi        | Re        | <b>Do</b> | So        |
|    | Mi        | <b>Do</b> | <b>Ti</b> | <b>La</b> | Mi        |    | Mi        | Do        | <b>Ti</b> | La        | Mi        |
|    | <b>Do</b> | La        | So        | Fa        | Do        |    | Do        | <b>La</b> | So        | Fa        | <b>Do</b> |

3. Sing each part as piano is played

### Day 3

[Video Link](#) – Lesson three

Objective – Students will compose and sing harmonies in step-wise motion within chord progressions.

1. Hand out worksheet. Allow students time to finish.
2. From each voice part, select one worksheet, and have each section learn to sing the part he/she composed as the piano is played.
3. Sing all parts together.
4. Select another worksheet from each section. Learn the parts, and sing it together.
5. Reflect – was one part harder than the other? Why or why not?

|  |    |    |            |    |
|--|----|----|------------|----|
| Wood Shedding Basics   |    |    | Name _____ |    |
| Fill in all missing solfege chord members:   |    |    |            |    |
| So   | Re | —  | Do         | So |
| Mi   | —  | Do | La         | —  |
| Do   | So | La | —          | Do |
| 2. Create your own voice part by choosing notes that are the same, or move up one, or move down one. NO SKIPS! |    |    |            |    |

**Figure 1** – Worksheet 1, creating individual harmony

### Day 4

[Video Link](#) – Lesson four

Objective – Students will improvise within sections to compose their own vocal line.

1. Write a I – IV – vi – V – I Chord progression on the board

|    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|----|----|----|
| So | Do | Mi | Re | So |
| Mi | La | Do | Ti | Mi |
| Do | Fa | La | So | Do |

2. Sing through the chords as piano plays

3. Ask each voice part to start on a different note

|               |           |           |           |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| First time –  | Part 1 Mi | Part 2 Do | Part 3 So |
| Second time – | Part 1 So | Part 2 Mi | Part 3 Do |
| Third time -  | part 1 Do | part 2 So | Part 3 Mi |

4. Try one of them acappella

## Day 5

[Video Link](#) – Lesson five

Objective – Students will create harmonies within sections with the song, “You Are My Sunshine” to create a chord progression.

1. Hand out “You Are My Sunshine” and have students sight sing it with solfege, then actual words.

2. Work with the students to create a chord progression by examining notes on in each measure  
Suggestions to students: 1. Observe steps or skips that outline a certain chord, 2. Observe solfege syllables that happen on beats 1 and 3.

Chord Priority: I, then V, then IV.

Chord progression we should arrive at:

|    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |    |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|
| 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 8.5 | 9  |
| NC | So | So | Do | So | Do | So | So | Re  | So |
|    | Mi | Mi | La | Mi | La | Mi | Mi | Ti  | Mi |
|    | Do | Do | Fa | Do | Fa | Do | Do | So  | Do |

3. Have each student write down the chord members where they belong.

# You Are My Sunshine

1. You are my sun - shine my on - ly sun - shine you make me  
 2. Do do re mi mi mi re mi do do do re mi

4 hap - py when skies are gray You'll nev - er know dear how much I  
 fa la la so fa mi do re mi fa la la so fa

7 love you Please don't take my sun - shine a - way  
 mi do do re mi fa re re mi do

**Figure 2** – Worksheet 2, “You Are My Sunshine” (Davis, 1940)

## Day 6

[Video Link](#) – Lesson six

Objective – Students will improvise within sections to create harmonies to the song “You Are My Sunshine.”

1. Write chords on the board that were discussed previously.
2. Have each section create their own harmonies to fit into the chords.  
 Part 1 Do Part 2 So Part 3 Mi  
 Additional rule: If you can return to your starting pitch, do it.
3. Have one part at a time sing.
4. Sing all together with melody, first with piano, then without.

## **Lesson Goals**

My goals for this set of lessons were: 1) Build on the students' knowledge of solfege and to give them a real world application for it, 2) Continue to develop a healthy culture, and, 3) Develop independence in the choir by never singing their parts for them.

The choir's knowledge has been developed over several years. They know the basic diatonic scale and how to skip to most intervals. Most recently they had learned how to make chords by singing specific intervals in order, for example a "do" chord involves singing, "do, mi, so, mi, do" and a "fa" chord involves, "fa, la, do, la, fa," etc. We focused on those two and the "so" and "la" chords as well (I have adapted the traditional syllable "sol" to "so" in order for the tongue not to raise to an unhealthy position while trying to insert the "l," hence producing a pure "oh" sound).

In my choir room, I seek to have effective rehearsals by having students be quiet and attentive while they are not actively singing. Everyone is involved with every part of rehearsal and should be ready to sing at any moment. The current 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade choir has had the toughest time of all of my choirs, so this has been a point of emphasis during this lesson. I sought to keep lessons engaging and moving along as to help them achieve these goals.

I often sing with my choirs so they can hear a good tone and attempt to match it. While this may work in developing this tone, it does not help them to become independent singers. By never singing with them, the choir developed more independence and confidence by discovering that they can sing by themselves and be successful.

## **Student Learning**

Students learned the basics of woodshedding, which is a technique that barbershop choirs use to accompany a song without written harmonies. They use their knowledge of the melody, harmonic structure, and typical voice writing in order to sing a song without the aid of written notes. This is a technique that I hope to use in the future to create or learn songs quickly to expand our repertoire and make performances more engaging.

## **Instructional Strategies**

Students already had knowledge of how to sing the basic chords that most popular songs and folk songs use: I (tonic), IV (sub-dominant), V (dominant), and vi (sub-median) chords. I also sought to make it easy for the students to succeed. Introducing a new topic in singing can lead to singers being timid and afraid to sing out. If they experience success early on, they will be more likely to try new things as we continue.

To help with student success, I made simple rules in lesson 2 – To create harmony, move up or down one note or stay the same, lesson 5 – Chord priority (sing a I chord if you can, V if you can't, or a IV if no other possibility), and lesson 6 – If you can return to your starting pitch, do so.

I also noticed that the students were not rehearsing well during lessons 1 and 2. I noticed that in these lessons I did not start class with warmups, but I jumped into the lesson plan right away. So, beginning with lesson 3, I started with in our normal way with typical choral warmups, which include vocalises or sight singing. This helped them focus, and they were more adaptable to learning new things. I also sought to incorporate the warmups into the lesson, for example, in

lesson 4, the La chord was high in the singers' range. So I helped them access their higher voice more easily before they were forced to sing it during the lesson.

## **Assessments**

Most assessments used during class were informal assessments I took by listening. If they did not sing a passage correct, I aided them as I normally did by stopping and rehearsing the sections.

Examples of formal assessments were the two worksheets. By using these, I would be able to see which students comprehended the content and those that did not. If enough were not ready to move on, I knew I would need to reteach. Fortunately, the majority of students were successful in completing the worksheets.

## **Future Instruction**

I will continue to develop this knowledge with all ages of choirs. In future years, I hope to use this technique in my varsity choir with holiday carols and singing valentines. I envision each of them bringing a melody of their favorite song along with the chords to rehearsal, and we create an accompaniment during class.

With this goal in mind, I will need to adjust the instruction to match the students' abilities as they expand their knowledge of woodshedding. There are many melodies and folk songs that could be incorporated into rehearsals to continue to push their abilities further, as well as incorporating all the diatonic chords.



## **Expanded Thinking and Teaching Practices**

These lessons have developed from my knowledge of Solfege, Curwen hand signs, and Gordon's Music Learning Theory. I have spent a lot of time developing the choir's aural skills, particularly singing intervals indicated by the hand signs. Most of this has been learned by rote, while I have also been teaching them sight singing for many years.

I have realized that I need to continue to learn more about Gordon's Music Learning Theory, particularly how to effectively introduce notation. I have also been reviewing the Curwen hand signs for the chromatic notes and introducing them as needed with the older students.

## **Chapter 3 - Reflections**

The most valuable classes during my time at K-State have been those that discuss theory and culture. Through listening to the professors and discussing with colleagues how they view their classes and rehearse their ensembles, I have discovered that our mission drives our teaching, developing a good culture of the program takes time and effort, developing a curriculum for young ages is important, and the relationships we develop with our students are paramount.

### **Mission and Vision**

I have developed a mission statement: “Teaching young men and women strong character, work ethic, and musicianship for a lifetime of making music.” As I have thought about what I want my students to be able to do once they leave my choirs, my mission has changed over time. Whereas I used to think that my students had to be the best musicians possible, I understand now that most of need other skills as well.

In the past, school music classes prepared students to be contributing members to a church choir. This is especially true in Hesston with a very deep and rich Mennonite culture. At Hesston, students used to sight-read hymns straight out of the Mennonite hymnal. Even though I grew up in a similar culture, I am finding that our youths have different priorities than singing in four-part harmony with piano.

I have searched for other priorities and have settled on bringing in part of our school’s vision of creating the kinds of people that many modern companies desire. The modern employee needs to be able to think critically, be motivated to accomplish self-guided tasks, and show up on time. These are known as soft skills. This is accomplished through having students

analyze themselves in class, both in how they are singing and how they are accomplishing their tasks. As I continue to teach, I plan to create an assessment for students to evaluate themselves.

I do still feel the need to teach them to become musicians, but in new and different ways. Ear training and aural skills have risen to the top of my list. For the modern church musician with a contemporary band, no one needs to read music. Instead, they learn everything by ear. Because singing is often done by ear anyway, this is vital to the success of the choir. I still plan to continue to teach students how to read music, but adding aural skills will greatly increase their ability.

### **Establishing Culture**

I wish to establish a culture of dedication, hard work, and good singing by emulating these myself. As we continue to have success, the students have started to assimilate into that culture. I hope that they can take it upon themselves to teach younger students as well. A senior can put positive pressure on an underclassman to meet these same expectations.

While I was teaching this unit, I emphasized our rehearsal techniques with the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade choir, namely that while I am working with other sections, or am speaking directly to the choir at large, they are to be listening. With students this age, they often will hear, but not listen, and so I emphasized these basic concepts daily.

It takes a long time to establish this culture. I sense that we take steps forward every year, but haven't truly arrived yet. Students like consistency and structure, and at a school like Hesston, I have the opportunity to work from grades 5-12 to establish this culture and have it be very strong.

## **Curriculum Development**

Another shift in my thinking has been how to teach younger students. Understanding Gordon's Music Learning Theory has advanced my teaching by allowing me to teach students aural skills by rote. This is something I previously stayed away from because I viewed rote teaching as inferior, and I wanted to teach them how to read music instead. But now I have a blend of the two, and their reading skills have vastly improved.

This lesson plan is the next step in applying the basic knowledge that we have learned. As I continue to develop the curriculum and program, I hope to push this content further as the students enter high school.

## **Teacher/Student Relationship**

The most important factor in a teacher's effectiveness is the relationship that the teacher is able to form with his or her students. Previously, my focus was on only the musicianship aspect of music education. But the longer I teach, the more I realize that students cherish the relationships they make and the experiences they create while making music with others.

Students come together in my classes with a common interest. Music classes have an advantage being an elective because students decide to be in our classes, and are therefore more invested. So while we are all there to make music, the natural result of doing things together is that relationships develop.

After every big event, especially our fall musical and spring variety show, we spend time together to reflect. What we discover is that through all the blood, sweat, and tears, we have developed a close bond that we will likely never share with the same people again. I tell these students every time that music is something special. In other activities or sports teams, the lower

skilled students may not participate, but in music, there is no hiding. In no other event does a freshman matter as much as a senior. Everyone has to rely on each other to accomplish our task. The end result is a trust between each member of the ensemble that rarely happens elsewhere. These relationships and memories are what drive me to work each day. It is a long and sometimes arduous process, but the reward is worth it.

Ultimately, I wish to create an atmosphere in every ensemble and activity that the students want to be a part of. By focusing on developing the right culture and building relationships, the musicianship aspect of teaching can happen easier and naturally. I hope to continue to converse with my colleagues and learn from my students in order to be a better teacher every year.

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